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CREDENTIALS

Embedding Certifications into Bachelor's Degrees Could Improve Transitions into the Labor Market

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There's a growing interest in embedding industry-recognized certifications into college and university degree programs. Workcred is working on a Lumina-supported project with the goal of improving students' transition from college to the labor market. The project is a partnership between Workcred, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU) and the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) with the goal of hosting a series of convenings to identify practical examples and opportunities to connect degrees and certifications. Holly Zanville interviews Karen Elzey to discuss the partnership, certifications and the development of their project.

Holly Zanville (HZ): You convened universities and certification bodies this past year to explore embedding industry and professional certifications into bachelor's degree programs in several disciplines. Which industry sectors did you select for these conversations and why?

Karen Elzey (KE): We selected three industry sectors: healthcare, cybersecurity, and manufacturing. All are closely linked to specific academic disciplines, but they also vary in some respects. Healthcare, for instance, has well-established certifications while other sectors have newer certifications and address emerging skills. In addition to specific industry sectors, we also explored certifications that may be relevant to graduates with liberal arts degrees.

HZ: Who is invited to these convenings, and how has the partnership with APLU, USU, and UPCEA facilitated this work?

KE: The response among universities and certification bodies has been extremely positive, with 41 universities sending teams and 27 certification bodies sending representatives.

APLU, USU, and UPCEA were instrumental in identifying universities, contacting presidents or chancellors to nominate teams of two or three individuals representing both the credit and continuing and professional education division of the university. We've had great representation from regions across the country, with contributions from institutions such as Florida International University, Georgia Institute of Technology, Morgan State University, Ohio University, San Jose State University, University of Missouri and University of Washington. Participating certification bodies offer programs related to our areas of focus and included such groups as the American Society for Clinical Pathology Board of Certification; the Association of Technology, Management, and Applied Engineering; Board of Certified Safety Professionals; CompTIA; and Project Management Institute. These groups were represented by their executive director or director of certification. Having high-level buy-in and engagement from both the universities and certification bodies has been key.

HZ: Is this the first time these representatives have come together to talk about the potential of integrating degrees and certifications?

KE: Yes, for the majority of the participants. We found that many certification bodies are unaware of the details of how university curricula are developed, and universities are unclear about the process of how standardized certification exams are developed. These convenings provide a unique opportunity to learn more about each side's processes and to identify ways that universities and certification bodies can work together.

HZ: What have the conversations at the convenings been like?

KE: The convenings have helped us better understand the issues we need to address to successfully integrate certifications into bachelor's degree programs. One key takeaway from all of the convenings is the lack of a common understanding of the terms "certificate" and "certification." I must say, though, that each convening included great discussions on how to define those terms.

HZ: Isn't there a common definition of certificate and certification?

KE: Unfortunately, no. A current, universally accepted definition doesn't exist. Based on our work with the certification community, we at Workcred define a certificate as a credential that is "awarded upon completion of an education or training program." But even that definition is imperfect since there are many types of certificates–certificates of completion, certificates of apprenticeship, assessment-based certificates, and certificates of participation. The challenge is that only a few types of certificates actually measure learning outcomes. That's important if you want to know if someone has learned the necessary material after participating in an education or training program. By contrast, a certification is a third-party independent assessment of competencies. It is not tied to education and training. Certifications have three distinct elements: a standardized exam, a recertification requirement and the ability of the awarding body to revoke the certification for proven incompetence or a violation of a code of ethics. It's important that these definitions are agreed upon before we begin having a conversation about them. Otherwise, there is a lot of confusion.

HZ: What ideas or models have emerged from the convenings?

KE: Several ideas emerged from the convenings. In the healthcare convening, participants discussed the opportunity to develop a new certification for students who complete a pre-professional healthcare science core curriculum. This certification would validate the

skills and competencies that students obtained regardless of where they went to school. Participants at the cybersecurity convening focused on comparing the competencies in the existing academic curriculum to several cybersecurity certifications so that students would be able to earn multiple certifications as part of their baccalaureate degree. Some suggested the need to identify other majors into which cybersecurity certifications could be embedded, such as music. Students who study music have skills –such as pattern recognition–that are critical in cybersecurity.

HZ: Do you think such a concept will become more widely adopted, especially in the post-pandemic learn-and-work marketplace we're facing?

KE: Yes, based on our convenings, there is a lot of interest from both universities and certification bodies to test different models. But there is also a need to experiment and learn how to overcome some of the challenges that exist. This concept may become even more important as individuals need to re-enter the workforce and as education and training providers adapt to changes as a result of the pandemic. By earning certifications, individuals can demonstrate that they possess specific skills and competencies. The combination of certifications

and degrees could help smooth an individual's transition into the labor market. Also, Inside Higher Education and Kaplan held an April 15 webinar that was really well attended and showed the interest in this concept.

HZ: What more can be done to accelerate these sorts of developments?

KE: We're still in the process of analyzing the data from the convenings. We will be assembling a report to be released in late summer, but here are three takeaways: first, we need to identify solutions to paying for the cost of certification exams when they are included in an academic program. Second, we should identify and disseminate clear indicators about how to assess quality, so that universities can make more informed decisions about whether a certification is appropriate to include as part of an academic program. Third, many certifications require work experience as part of the prerequisites to take the certification exam. However, many certification bodies do not count internships or work that is part of pursuing an academic degree as eligible to meet the prerequisites. Certification bodies may need to review their work experience requirements to address the reality that many students both attend college and work. This will become even more relevant as the country emerges from the

pandemic.

HZ: Is there a way for data owned by certification bodies to be grouped with other data about degree and certificate completion?

KE: Yes, Workcred is part of an effort with the National Student Clearinghouse to gather data from certification bodies. We recently formed a network of 30 industry certification bodies covering a range of industry sectors to discuss the value of having certification bodies voluntarily share their data. The National Student Clearinghouse could then match the data from certification bodies with other data on education attainment and earnings, so that we can all learn more about the return on investment on a variety of credentials.

HZ: As a supporter of this work, Lumina Foundation is very interested to see if this type of data can improve our systems by better aligning education and training with the labor market. Do you think that's a realistic vision?

KE: Absolutely, we share this vision. Certifications are an important part of the credentialing system. The ability to receive data from certification bodies is crucial to understanding certifications' respective returns on investment. With such

cooperation, we would be able to gather important data about whether the certification by itself, or when combined with other credentials, is necessary to succeed in the labor market. In addition, we would have stronger data related to actual career and credential pathways.

HZ: What are the biggest challenges with asking certification bodes to share their data?

KE: The main concerns are the numerous data privacy protection regulations that restrict how personal data can be stored, processed, and shared. These include the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which is a regulation that impacts the transfer of personal data in- and outside of the European Union, and the new California Consumer Privacy Act, which provides its citizens with GDPR-like protections that include a requirement for companies to inform consumers about the data collected and shared, and gives them a right to access, delete, and opt-out. Other challenges include data integrity, data security, methods of integration with multiple databases and various aspects of meeting and maintaining accreditation.

HZ: Can these challenges be addressed and overcome?

KE: Yes, they can. It is critical to engage certification bodies in these discussions, so they can provide information about the challenges that exist and help develop solutions to them.

HZ: Thank you to Workcred and the partnership you have assembled to focus on this important work. What are the next steps to accelerate this work?

KE: To accelerate the work, we need to test different certification-/degree program-embedding models in a variety of academic disciplines that cut across industry sectors. By testing different models, we can document solutions to both real and perceived challenges. We also need more certification bodies to agree to share their data with the National Student Clearinghouse. That will allow policymakers and others to have better data about career and credential pathways and learn whether the combination of degrees and certifications leads to better labor market outcomes for individuals. The exciting news is that there is a lot of interest among certification bodies and universities to try new strategies. We look forward to continuing to work with these organizations in an effort to create more opportunities for students.

HZ: How will the results of this work be shared with the field?

KE: This summer, we will issue a framework to inform the development of future pilot programs. The framework will include the outcomes and themes that emerged from the four convenings. This information will be shared widely though the Workcred, APLU, USU, and UPCEA networks.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Inserting certifications into degree programs allows students to learn and upskill in their respective field before even entering the workforce.

Policymakers are testing different career and credential pathways to find the best credential-degree combination using credential bodies' data.

It's important for partners to first define what the term "certificate" and "certification" means to them before signing a contract, since there is no universally accepted definition for either.